

FORUM

On book reviews: Why, when and how to write them

MICHAELA HAILBRONNER — 9 August, 2017



Book reviews are perhaps a difficult format for academic writing. After all, what we all like to do best is talk about ourselves and our own ideas and why we are right. Writing a book review, however, puts someone else's work in prime position; readers learn first about the reviewed work and only secondly something about the writer of the review herself. Perhaps this is why so few scholars, in particular established scholars, still agree to write reviews. It takes time and the authors and their ideas figure less prominently than in other forms of academic writing.

Yet writing book reviews makes sense, as an ethical obligation and, at least for younger scholars, it is often a good strategic choice. As academics we all write books, which we'd like people to pay attention to and reviews are one way of bringing books to a wider audience. In our own research, we also often read book reviews in order to decide whether or not to go through the trouble to buy and read certain books. Book reviews are therefore an important part of our academic universe. Writing them is consequently often understood as part of our academic obligations and that seems right. For younger scholars – to whom this post is mostly directed – they also provide an opportunity to get a first or second publication out and start building up a record. They may not carry the same weight as a journal article, but they are also shorter, much less work, and they tend to get read, often by more people than a long journal article. Finally, it is easier to get them published given that many journals today have problems finding enough good book reviews.

So when should we write reviews? My personal answer would be that we should write them first and foremost about the books that excite us, both in a good and bad way. We should write reviews on books that shape how we think and what we think about, about those that offer what you can't refuse and/or make promises they can't keep. And as international and comparative lawyers we should also and especially write about those books that seem neglected and are not at the center of the international debate, but should be – perhaps because they are not written in English or because their authors write in a different style or academic tradition. More than elsewhere in law, international and comparative scholars need to keep their own minds open to the unfamiliar and convince others to do the same. Reading new books and reviewing them is one good way to do just that.

So arm yourselves with two bottles of wine on a weekend, a pen and the book in question and get started! If you have children, two or three weekday mornings will do, too; after all, a house where no child is presently crying or where the crying is no longer your problem can be more peaceful than any chalet in the Swiss mountains. And you should feel free to write critical reviews, too. They are the hardest to write perhaps, especially when we ourselves have written books and know the pitfalls. So be a generous writer, and keep in mind that we all have our flaws. But you don't have to be rude to point out problems. Being an academic is all about taking books and their arguments seriously and that implies critical engagement – this in fact is the best way to show respect.

Once you have decided to write a review, think first about where to publish it. Younger scholars often seem hesitant to approach journals and instead send reviews to blogs. This might be a mistake. Though some journals only commission their own reviews and never take unsolicited submissions, it has become increasingly hard to get enough good reviews so many editors today take up suggestions, especially if you check with them beforehand if they are interested in the title and what the rules are. Blogs are particularly suited for shorter, punchier contributions. Journals will be interested in somewhat longer, more intensive engagements with the reviewed works. If you are unsure about the format, ask the editor to send you an example of a good review.

Most importantly, you should never write a review for a friend's book or take revenge on your enemies by writing on their recent work. It's unprofessional and corrupt – even if others are doing it, bear in mind they're doing it visibly. If your private and professional networks overlap (as with many of us), ask yourself critically how close you are to the author and what motives are driving you to want to write a book review. When in doubt, decline.

What then does a good review look like? Different editors and journals have different styles, of course, but the basics are the same: A competent review provides a clear and well-structured summary of the book's main argument(s), a short evaluation of those arguments and finally and ideally an assessment as to whether and why the book matters to the broader debate in the field.

As most of us perhaps, I find the assessment of the book the most interesting part to read. Any review needs to provide a summary of the key arguments, but it should never stop there. The summary is important mainly as a means to an end. That end is to give us an account of why the book matters or why it doesn't: whether we should read it or not really bother, given that there are already too many books out there for us to read them all. In this final part of your review, you are quite free. Don't just try to show how clever you are or why the book is not the book you would have written (a mistake I once made and have regretted since). Engage with the book on its own terms. Tell us what the author gets wrong or right, what she overlooks, where you are not convinced or where you are convinced, perhaps contrary to your initial impulse, and why. If you're writing a longer review or perhaps even a review essay, tell us how the book or books fit into the existing literature and how they will influence the debate or not, whether they make any genuinely new point, are boring and repetitive or, as with most books, give us perhaps less a new idea than a new angle to an old debate and whether that angle is a useful one. If you do that, then you may not just write a good review but a great one.

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Cite as: Michaela Hailbrunner, "On Book Reviews: Why, when and how to write them",

Völkerrechtsblog, 9 August 2017, doi: 10.17176/20170809-150326.

ISSN 2510-2567

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